

# *Sketch*

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## Them Spring Flowers

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# Them Spring Flowers

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"MY, BUT the house sure looks nice all cleaned up. Charley'll be pleased." Bertha kept bustling about the room, staightening doilies as though dressing up her home. Stopping in front of a dark brown, overstuffed recliner, she replaced the fallen head rest.

"Charley likes his chair to be ready to sit in. Don't know what I'd do without that man to baby and watch after.. Probably get lots more needle work done." Bertha's voice was low and scratchy, but it had a certain hum in it, the kind it got when she was doing things for the people she loved. Moving on, she stopped again, at a side table, and lovingly picked up a clay ashtray.

"Little Jimmy made that for his daddy back in third grade—a wonder it hasn't got broken. Lord Almighty, that was forty years ago. An' I haven't got Charley broken of chewing snuff yet." Holding the ashtray carefully, Bertha ambled to the kitchen where she emptied the dried contents and completely rinsed all the signs of tobacco. Charley always liked for her to leave a few marks so that he wouldn't feel bad about chewing, but now it was better that they go.

Returning the ashtray to the parlor, Bertha again surveyed the room, nodding her head in appreciation at the fresh flowers on the buffet. Bertie, Janey's youngest, had picked the lilacs yesterday. "Only five, but such a bright youngster already." Charley's favorite too, even though he wouldn't admit it. "Charley likes them spring flowers best—says they air out the house." Bertha touched the lilacs softly as she spoke. "Says it helps bring the outdoors in again."

As Bertha turned, she nearly tripped over a footstool.

Lowering herself gingerly onto the edge of the chair beside it, her eyes stared at the thing. "Land o'goshen, that's the first time in twenty years I missed seeing that monster. Maybe Jimmy ought to move it upstairs now, out of the way." Shaking her head slowly, Bertha pushed herself up again with her gnarled hands.

"No time for sitting idle, today or anytime. Gotta get the dishes on the table for all the company coming. Janey said she'd help, but can't count on that. Charley used to call her the worst dawdler he'd ever seen. But that's her husband's worry now, not her father's."

Carrying the freshly washed plates to the dining table, Bertha began to put each one in its place beside the silver, giving each platter a soft pat as she did. The china was old and had seen the family through many a meal. By saving carefully, Bertha had managed to build a complete set. Charley'd been proud, although he wouldn't admit it.

"Lord, what a time I had even getting him to help me pick it out! We were going to be married in one month, and he wouldn't go to the store with me even." Bertha closed her eyes, still picturing the scene. "When I did finally get him there, Charley plopped down in the first chair he came to and wouldn't budge—nope, not an inch! Old Maisie Green and I had to carry every pattern up for him to see. Finally said he liked these, said the flowers reminded him of lilacs." Bertha was now staring at the plate in her hand. "Always did like them spring flowers." Setting down the last plate, Bertha moved slowly back to the kitchen again.

"Guess that's about all I can do now. Better get the coffee on though." Plugging in the borrowed thirty-cup percolator, Bertha mused at the strength of the coffee.

"Sure hope it's strong enough. Lord Almighty, I can still remember the first cup of Charley's coffee—nearly spit it out. Can't stand it any weaker now. Must have been the Swede in Charley that made him like coffee so strong." Bertha shifted her weight from one foot to the other, as though trying to think of some forgotten chore, reluctant

to leave. After a long silence, she sighed, took off her apron, and placed it over a chair.

"Guess I'd better get dressed. No more to be done now." Bertha walked to the stairs and started up, groaning at each step, even though she took them one by one.

"These old feet sure are wearing out fast. Wonder if Charley was just joshing last week . . . when he said they were transplanting feet? If them city doctors can do hearts, why not feet . . . sure would be nice." Reaching the top of the stairs, Bertha turned and walked to their bedroom, where she began to lay out her Sunday dress, but then remembered and got the new dress—the one Janey had bought for her yesterday. Pushing it aside, she began to change.

"Jimmy keeps saying that now that we got a bathroom downstairs, we ought to move the bedroom too. Worries too much about his old mother. Don't think I could get used to the idea of our bedroom being down there." Bertha went on dressing silently, pausing several times to gaze at the lilac bushes blooming in the yard below. At last she came to the dress.

"Got one o'them new-fangled hidden zippers. Could have told Janey I wouldn't like that. Should have." Charley always helped her with her zippers, except when chores kept him late. Today it took five minutes for Bertha to tug and pull until the zipper was up.

"Finally! Guess I better hurry and get my shoes on. Now where are those old black things?" Just as Bertha found them, she heard Janey drive up. She was half-way down the stairs before Janey came in.

"Hello, Mom. Are you all ready?"

"Yes, Honey. Don't worry."

"Let me help you—those stairs are getting to be too much."

"No, Janey. I'll get along by myself." Reaching the floor, Bertha gazed questioningly at her daughter. With tears in her eyes, Janey spoke.

"Mary Jackson took the lilacs on out to the cemetery."

"Charley always did like them spring flowers."